

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 INR-07

NSAE-00 PA-01 USIA-06 PRS-01 SP-02 /040 W

-----242037Z 086781 /53

R 241630Z MAR 77

FM AMCONSUL MARTINIQUE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2554

INFO AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN

AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO

COMNAVFORCARIB ROOSEVELT ROADS PR

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, FW, FR

SUBJECT: MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN THE FRENCH WEST INDIES-GUIANA

SUMMARY: THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS ON MARCH 13 AND 20 IN THE FRENCH ANTILLES AND FRENCH GUIANA WERE SOMEWHAT ROUTINE AFFAIRS WITH VOTERS CONTINUING THE SAME SHIFT TO THE LEFT WHICH OCCURRED IN LAST YEAR'S COMMUNAL ELECTIONS. VOTING PATTERNS FOLLOWED TRADITIONAL LINES, WITH GUADELOUPE AND FRENCH GUIANA SUPPORTING LEFT OF CENTER CANDIDATES WHILE MARTINIQUE STAYED IN THE GAULLIST (RPR) CAMP. THE COMMUNISTS MADE NO GAINS AND ON BALANCE APPEAR TO HAVE EMERGED WEAKER IN GUADELOUPE AND MARTINIQUE, THE FIRST TIME THIS HAS HAPPENED IN SEVERAL YEARS. CONTRARY TO OUR EARLIER EXPECTATIONS, THE ELECTIONS GAVE US NO HELP IN TRYING TO READ TRENDS IN POPULAR ATTITUDES TOWARD AUTONOMY. VOTER PARTICIPATION RAN BETWEEN 60-65 PERCENT AND VOTER INTEREST WAS FAIRLY LIMITED EXCEPT IN FORT-DE-FRANCE WHERE AIMEE CESAIRE MOUNTED A VIGOROUS AND SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN TO MAINTAIN HIS 30-YEAR HOLD ON THE CITY HALL.

1. GUADELOUPE: GUADELOUPE STAYED WELL WITHIN ITS TRADITIONAL PATTERN OF VOTING AS LEFT WING CANDIDATES WON, WE ESTIMATE, WELL OVER 55

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PERCENT OF ALL VOTES CAST. AT THE END OF THE SECOND ROUND VOTING, 18 LEFTIST MAYORS WERE ELECTED--8 SOCIALISTS, 7 COMMUNISTS, 1 UNATTACHED EX-COMMUNIST AND 3 PROGRESSISTE PARTY CANDIDATES. IN ADDITIONAN THE SIX INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES RAN ON LEFTIST PLATFORMS SO THAT LEFTIST STRENGTH IS EVEN GREATER THAN APPEARANCES SUGGEST. AMONG THE IMPORTANT CONTESTS WERE THOSE IN THE CAPITAL TOWN OF BASSE-TERRE WHERE INCUMBENT COMMUNIST MAYOR JEROME CLERY INCREASED

HIS PLURALITY FROM 55 PERCENT IN 1973 TO 66, AND IN POINTE-A-PITRE WHERE THE PLURALITY OF COMMUNIST PARTY CHIEFTAN, HENRI BANGOU, RAN TO AN ASTONISHING 81 PERCENT. THERE WERE PERSONAL VICTORIES BY POPULAR COMMUNIST LEADERS AND THEY WERE MORE THAN OFFSET BY AN OVERWHELMING DEFEAT THE COMMUNISTS SUFFERED IN CAPESTERRE WHERE THE FORMER DEPUTY MAYOR, WHO BROKE RECENTLY WITH THE CP, WON WITH AN 86 PERCENT PLURALITY, AND IN THE TOWN OF BAILEFF WHERE THE INCUMBENT COMMUNIST WAS DEFEATED BY A RELATIVELY UNKNOWN INDEPENDENT. ALSO, THE CP STANDS TO LOSE A DISPUTED ELECTION IN ST. ANNE WHERE DEPUTY IBENE WAS APPARENTLY DEFEATED BY AN RPR CANDIDATE. REPUBLICAIN INDEPENDENTS (RI) AND RPR CANDIDATES HELD ON TO EIGHT CITY HALLS WHILE LOSING TWO. ONLY IN MARIGOT (ST. MARTIN) DID THE RPR GAIN A CITY HALL.

2. MARTINIQUE: MARTINIQUE SHOWED STABILITY IN VOTING FOR CONSERVATIVE OR "PRESIDENTIAL MAJORITY" CANDIDATES, ALTHOUGH THE LEFT APPEARS TO HAVE GAINED SOME 2 OR 3 PERCENT IN OVER-ALL POPULAR VOTES. TWENTY THREE RPR, RI OR MAJORITY CANDIDATES WON EASY VICTORIES. OPPOSITION CANDIDATES TOOK 11 CITY HALLS. COMMUNIST GAINS WERE MINIMAL: IN ST. ESPRIT A VIGOROUS GAULLIST CAMPAIGNER HANDILY DEFEATED THE LONGTIME COMMUNIST MAYOR, AND IN BASSE-POINTE THE PARTY SUFFERED A MINOR DISASTER WHEN ITS LEADER, ARMAND NICHOLAS, TOOK LESS THAN 30 PERCENT OF THE VOTES IN A CONTEST WITH A RELATIVELY WEAK GAULLIST CANDIDATE.

3. THE MOST IMPORTANT CONTEST IN THE FWI WAS IN FORT-DE-FRANCE WHERE MAYOR AIMEE CESAIRE, RUNNING AGAINST LAWYER LEON LAURENT VALLERE, WON AN OVERWHELMING VICTORY WITH 70 PERCENT OF THE VOTE. CESAIRE'S VICTORY WAS ALL THE MORE SURPRISING BECAUSE VALLERE WAS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THOUGHT THE STRONGEST CANDIDATE EVER TO BE PITTED AGAINST HIM. AS IN FORMER YEARS, CESAIRE RAN ON A PLATFORM OF AUTONOMY AND "MARTINIQUEAN NATIONALISM," AND THE ELECTION WAS WIDELY DEPICTED AS A CHOICE BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND CONTINUED DEPARTMENTAL STATUS. SUPPORTERS ARE NOW CLAIMING THAT CESAIRE'S OVERWHELMING VICTORY REFLECTS GROWING POPULAR SENTIMENT FOR AUTONOMY. THIS MAY BE CORRECT, BUT WE FIND IT A SLIPPERY TASK TO ASSESS CESAIRE'S VICTORY IN POLITICAL TERMS. CESAIRE IS UNDOUBTEDLY THE MOST POPULAR POLITICAL LEADER IN THE FWI, BUT WE THINK HIS VICTORY WAS DUE MORE TO THE PERSONAL FOLLOWING AND ALLEGIANCE HE ENJOYS THAN TO THE POLITICAL IDEAS HE ESPOUSES.

4. FRENCH GUIANA: FRENCH GUIANA'S ELECTIONS SHOWED LITTLE SHIFT FROM PAST VOTING PATTERNS. ELEVEN OF NINETEEN MAYORS WERE RETURNED TO OFFICE, AND THE HIGHLIGHT OF THE ELECTIONS WAS THE CLASH BETWEEN SOCIALIST MAYOR LEOPOLD HEDER AND RPR DEPUTY HECTOR RIVIEREZ IN THE CAPITAL TOWN OF CAYENNE. THERE, WHERE OVER 55 PERCENT OF ALL GUIANESE VOTERS ARE REGISTERED, HEDER, A STRONG SUPPORTER OF AUTONOMY

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TOOK 64.5 PERCENT OF ALL VOTES. NO CLEAR TRENDS EMERGED IN OTHER ELECTIONS, BUT HEDER'S EASY TRIUMPH SHOWED THE GUIANESE ELECTORATE SUPPORTS MORE THAN NOT LEFTWING AUTONOMISTS.

5. COMMENT: THE ELECTIONS ARE TOO MUCH OF A MIXED BAG TO ALLOW GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT POPULAR TRENDS FOR OR AGAINST AUTONOMY. THEY DO, HOWEVER, CONFIRM THE LEFT TRENDS WE OBSERVED IN THE LOCAL COMMUNAL ELECTIONS A YEAR AGO, BUT THE SHIFT DOES NOT SEEM TO BE A STRONG ONE. IN GUADELOUPE AND FRENCH GUIANA, LEFTIST AND AUTONOMIST SENTIMENTS HAVE BEEN STRONGER IN RECENT YEARS THAN IN MARTINIQUE WHERE, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF FORT-DE-FRANCE, GAULLISTS HAVE BEEN THE DOMINANT POLITICAL FORCE.

6. THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN METROPOLITAN FRANCE, WHICH SUGGEST A SOCIALIST-COMMUNIST COALITION VICTORY IN THE 1978 LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS, CARRY MORE IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE THAN DO THE LOCAL ONES. IN THE 1973 COMMON PROGRAM, THE SOCIALISTS AND LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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COMMUNISTS AGREED ON THE RIGHT OF "AUTODETERMINATION" FOR THE OVERSEAS DEPARTMENTS, AND PRESUMABLY A SOCIALIST-COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT IN PARIS WOULD REVIEW THE DEPARTMENTAL STATUS OF MARTINIQUE, GUADELOUPE AND FRENCH GUIANA. WE HAVE ALREADY HEARD MUCH CONCERN EXPRESSED HERE ABOUT THE FUTURE IF THE LEFT CARRIES NEXT YEAR'S ELECTIONS. OBVIOUSLY A SOCIALIST-COMMUNIST COALITION, IF ONE WERE TO COME INTO POWER IN PARIS, WOULD HAVE MANY MORE IMPORTANT THINGS TO WORRY ABOUT THAN THE POLITICAL STATUS OF FRENCH OVERSEAS DEPARTMENTS, BUT LOCAL PROPONENTS OF DEPARTMENTAL STATUS--THE RI, THE RPR, THE PRESIDENTIAL MAJORITY--TAKE SMALL COMFORT IN THE THOUGHT. THE FEARS OF THE LOCAL CONSERVATIVES MAY BE EXAGGERATED, FOR THE LARGER PART OF LOCAL VOTERS PROBABLY WOULD NOT, IN OUR OPINION, SUPPORT AUTONOMY IF IT MEANT LOSING THE FINANCIAL ADVANTAGES WHICH COME WITH DEPARTMENTAL STATUS. HOWEVER, AIMEE CESAIRE'S VICTORY IN FORT-DE-FRANCE, AND THE OVERWHELMING COMMUNIST VICTORIES IN POINTE-A-PITRE AND BASSE-TERRE, SHOW THAT BROAD SUPPORT EXISTS FOR CANDIDATES WHO DEMAND AUTONOMY. THE IMPORTANT POINT IS THAT A VICTORY OF THE LEFT IN 1978, IF IT RESULTS IN A MITTERAND-MARCHAIS GOVERNMENT, WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY LEAD TO A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE METROPOLE'S TIES WITH THE ANTILLES DEPARTMENTS AND FRENCH GUIANA AND A RESULTING PERIOD OF UNDERTAINTY AND INSTABILITY HERE. SHACKLETON

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
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Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
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Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
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Format: TEL
From: MARTINIQUE
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
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Line Count: 161
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Litigation History:
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Message ID: 419df0b2-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION ARA
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 24-Mar-2005 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3010354
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN THE FRENCH WEST INDIES-GUIANA SUMMARY: THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS ON MARCH 13 AND 20 IN THE FRENCH ANTILLES AND FRENCH GUIANA WE RE SOMEWHAT ROUTINE A
TAGS: PINT, FW, FR, MB
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/419df0b2-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009